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AUTHOR Bristow, M. B. Smith
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ABSTRACT

Black feminist novelists continue to take issue with males who try to theorize about their artistic creations. Male attitudes toward black women's novels have been characterized as either apathetic, chauvinistic, or paternalistic. Black feminist writers should heed the call for collective racial progress and collective theoretical progress. The next stage will entail the establishment of a theory, perhaps a reception theory, for reading/studying black feminist writings. Males' attempts to theorize about black feminist literature often betray a disturbing paternalism. What is needed is a reception theory involving a tripartite hermeneutics consisting of understanding, explanation, and application coupled with perceptions of the sociology of language, literacy, and literature. Relationships between female characters in black women's lesbian fiction should be taken as metaphors for how the reader should receive the work. This reception theory sees the reader as symbiotic mother and symbolic mother, and can be demonstrated through a reading of the Toni Morrison novel, "Sula." The character Sula can be viewed as a great mother archetype. The reader should also bear in mind the powerful feminine mythology that creative women writers are heir to, such as African goddess paradigms. Finally, "Sula" is a novel about making meaning, a classic postmodern text endlessly reconstructing itself, a virtual carnival of repetitions. (HB)

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Toward A Theory of Reading Black Feminists' Writings

by Dr. M. B. Smith Bristow

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Let me give you a true anecdote that reflects my view of black feminists in literature who desire to couch their canon in more theoretical critical terms, but from a feminine perspective.

While I was in bed my husband whom I have been married to for nineteen years came up stairs with my panties, asking me whether or not I wanted them as part of his wash. Well, I was furious and exclaimed," Marshall, just leave them where I put them. I'll wash them!"

Such is the attitude I feel of black feminist novelists. I feel they don't want Houston Baker to theorize their art. They don't want Henry Louis Gates to theorize their art. They don't want Stanley Fish to theorize about their art. These are their panties. They wish to wash them. Yes, black feminist novelists wish to hang them out all clean and spring-time fresh on the line for critics to see.Bearing in mind that all the aformentioned are names of top male literary critics, a noted critic of black women's literature, Miriam DeCosta-Willis has quoted Dandridge in the College Language Association journal September 13, 1979 in saying black male critics' attitudes toward black women's novels can be divided into three categories: those who are apathetic, those who are chauvinistic, and those who are paternalistic.

First definitions must be clarified. I am using theory in the late Latin sense of the word as theoria which means a viewing, a comtemplation. (I feel guilty using the phallocentric term theory because it reeks of male centered definitions. Such is the neurotic character of our language, as Susan Sontag refers to it. We must bear

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in mind her caveat: definition is not always synonymous with meaning. Thus a black feminist novelist, taking into consideration the focus of Mary Helen Washington in her book which she edited entitled Invented Lives: Narrative of Black Women (1860-1960) and Hazel Carby's book Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist, is a novelist who takes into consideration racism, sexism, and classism. Hence a black feminist novelist is defined as a black female writer who addresses the issues of racism, sexism, and classism in her writings.

Black women in America have a history of writing that started most notably with Phillis Wheatley in 1773, but according to several black feminists as Mary Helen Washington and Beverly Guy Shelftall of SAGE, it was Anna Julia Cooper who wrote the first black feminist writing in 1892. It was entitled A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South. It is part of the famous Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

In a review of it in The Women's Review of Books, a newspaper which all feminists should read regardless of race, Anna Cooper in 1892 gives the warning which theorists of black feminist literature should heed. Why should they heed it? Becaue it called for collective racial progress. And I would extend it to also call for collective theoretical progress as to how readers should receive their art.It reads as follows:

> Only the Black Woman can say when and where I enter in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.

Black Feminist novelists have gone beyond the first stage in feminist writing, i.e. establishing the fact that there is a canon

of such novels largely a reaction to the advent of feminist scholarship among white women writers, to what I call a second stage to borrow the title from Betty Friedan's book The Second Stage (1981).

This second stage should involve the establishment of a theory perhaps a reception theory for reading black feminist writings. Houston Baker in Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing (1991) has sought to do just that: provide a theory as to how these works should be read, but his book reeks of a disturbing phallocentrism, Not surprising, Bernard Bell in The Afro-American Novel:Its Traditions (1989) devotes two pages to black feminism in literature. The following comments taken from these two pages gives the reader the names of some of the top black female literary critics and a brief flavor of the controversy surrounding the concept of black feminism in literature:

> As illustrated in their fiction, interviews in Black Women Writers at Work, and the pioneer essays on black feminist criticism by Barbara Smith and Deborah E.McDowell, many black women novelists employ to a greater or lesser degree the following signs and structures: (1) motifs of interlocking racist, sexist, and classist oppression; (2) black female protagonists; (3) spiritual journeys from victimization to the realization of personal autonomy or creativity; (4) a centrality of female bonding or networking; (5) a sharp focus on personal relationships in the family and community; (6) deeper, more detailed exploration and validation of the epistemological power of the emotions;(7) iconography of women's clothing; and (8) black female language [as quoted by Bell from Showalter's book The New Feminist Criticism(1985). While agreeing with Smith that feminist criticism is "a valid and necessary cultural and political enterprise," McDowell questions the impreciseness of current definitions of lesbianism by black feminists, the possible reductiveness of a lesbian aesthetic and the vagueness of Smith's analysis in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." McDowell advocates that black feminist critics combine a contextual approach with rigorous textual analysis, including a concern for the issue of gender-specific language(243).

But observe his final assessment of black literary feminism

which reflects a disturbing paternalism: "because there are many intertexual parallels between black male and female novelists, readers should examine these parallels to determine the distinctiveness, consistency, and frequency of their appearance and use in narratives of black women in deciding for themselves whether a separate black female literary tradition exists(244).

The disturbing implication in the above is that since he does know whether a black female literary tradition exists, then we (females) need to check to see if it really does!

However McDowell was right in calling for more clarity in definitions when discussing black feminist literature. In a most recent article on black feminist theory in College English (April 1992), Gay Willenz calls for a "diaspora literacy" which she uses synonymously and erroneously to mean also a diapora literature (385).

This theory of reading black feminist writers must take into consideration language theory, literacy theory, and literature theory, somethings Baker failed to take into account and many modern black female critics as Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Barbara Christian.

What I feel is needed is a reception theory that involves a tripartite hermeneutics. These parts are understanding, explanation, and application coupled with how we perceive the sociology of language, literacy, and literature. I am not using the noun phrase "reception theory" in the strict sense of Jaus and Woofgang Iser, but in the loose term as a theory as to how we receive an author's work, in other words how we interpret it. I shall propose how black feminist works should be read in light of this and use Morrison's Sula as an example. My thesis is this: the relationship between female characters in most

black women's fiction such as The Women of Brewster's Place, and Shange's Sassafras, Cypress, and Indigo should be taken as metaphors for how the reader should receive the works. Lesbian relationships are none other than metaphors for concretizing reader responses. They should be taken as the author's way of saying let's rid ourselves of such phallocentric manichism as subject/object, writer/reader, reader/text, I/thou, binary oppositions which intrude on one's receiving meaning from the text. These relationships reflect the author's call for literary "communion" in its highest form: when the dancer does indeed become the dance. So the relationship between lesbian lovers becomes a paradigm that dissolves the boundaries between author/audience, narrator/reader, self/other, logic/illogic, univocal/polyvocal, subjectivity/objectivity, making it impossible to locate a position of dominance in interpretation.

Hence this feminist reception theory which I am proposing sees the reader as symbiotic mother and symbolic mother--the first being a pull away from, the second being a pull toward which occurs in the psychological make-up of many lesbians as shown in lesbian writer Willa Cather's psychological make-up best delineated in O'Brien's brilliant psychoanalytical biography of her.

Most people know the plot of Morrison's Sula, so I will not belabor the details. But a question is often asked: "How are we as readers to take Sula's character?" I shall now apply my reception theory that involves the reader bonding to the mother, the narrator. From a nonfeminist perspective, Sula will be diagnozed as psychologically dysfunctional. But note what the narrator says about her in describing her uncanny effect on people of the Bottom:

> In their world, aberrations were as much a part of nature as grace. It was not for them to expel or annihilate it. They would no more run Sula out of town than they would kill the robins that brought her back, for in their secret awareness of Him, he was not the God of three faces they sang about. They knew quite well that He had four, and the fourth explained Sula.

If we are to apply this reception theory of black feminist writers as mothering or twinning, then Sula is to be viewed none other than a great mother archetype, one of the most powerful archetypes in Jung's book Four Archetypes. As such she is goddess and as all scholars of feminine mythology know, a goddess has how many aspects? Three. She is nurturer, destroyer, and carries a numinosity between those two to paraphrase Erich Neumann in his book The Great Mother: An Analysis of of the Archetype. Now if Sula served as the fourth face of God, we have God himself reaching individuation through Sula. Four as Jung reminds us in his Symbols of Transformation is always connoted with wholeness.

One critic misinterpreted the novel asserting after Sula's death, Nell's mental state became as disoriented as Sula's, but observe this excerpt from the narrator in quoting Nell:

> "All the time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude [he is her husband whom Sula had seduced] And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together, she said as though explaining something."O Lord,Sula." she cried, "Girl,girl,girl, girl girl."

So in essence Nell was missing Sula, not her husband. In my interpretation applying a black feminist perspective in terms of a reception theory, Sula and Nell are two aspects of the same goddess archetype. As such they are symbiotic mothers and symbolic mothers of each other. Their relationship is similar to Pretty Pearl and her

spiritual double whose name is Mother Pearl in the young adult novel by Virginia Hamilton. Its title is The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl and in it you have a child with a spiritual double that serves as mother, a doppelganger that actually walks around accompanying her.

This is just how the reader is to read MOrrison's novel Sula. The reader and the narrator are supposed to form a true communion reminiscent of Luce Iriguray's essay "When Two Lips Meet."

Hence this so-called sexual union in some black lesbian feminist novels is none other than a metaphor for the reader responding to the quest to dismiss all walls, do away with all binary oppositions and rid itself of the classic male dictates of aesthetic distance.

Annis Pratt cautions readers to be aware of clinging to traditional (formerly masculine) ways of knowing and describing, thus calling for alternative interpretive structures (80). Hence this new reading of black feminist writings provides a new way of knowing and describing.

For a theory of reading black feminist writings to be truly couched in feminitude, the reader must also bear in mind the powerful feminine mythology that creative women writers are heir to. I will explain in further interpretive details of Sula.

For thcse who read black feminist novels and confront black women who defy classification, Sula being a classic example and so is Janine in Morrison's book Tarbaby, beware! These black female characters can be taken as embodiments of the most mysterious goddess in Africa whose name is Oya of the Yoruban pantheon. One should carefully note that Diedre Badejo of the University of Rhode Island calls for an African goddess paradigm to be used in feminist writings by black women, but she failed to identify both aspects of African goddesses:

nurturer and destroyer.

Oya manifests herself in various natural forms: the river Niger, tornadoes, strong winds, fire, lightning, buffalo and birds. Does this remind you of Sula? Reread Sula and note imagery of fire, water, wind dominate the novel. When Sula returns after a ten year separation, robins follow her into town. One must remember the goddess Oya had through witchcraft, the power to transform herself into a bird. In a praisesong to Oya(Nicholson 58), note references that can apply to Sula--dark forest, deepest obscurity, references to violence, powerful rivers, references to the sun, to the color yellow, to a nine-head apparition, references to violent fireburns, and violent foods. Remember while Sula was alive the community has life; after she died the community seems to have died. "She quarrels with you and never will you win. Even if she doesn't quarrel with you, she'll terrify, insatiable vagina"(59). Now doesn't that remind you of Sula. She makes love to the husband of her best friend. When Nel asks her why, Sula on her deathbed says,"I didn't love him; I just fucked him."

There is a lot of destruction in Sula. However that is in keeping with the other aspect of her goddesshood. We must remember that the oldest gods of warfare and destruction were feminine, not masculine. Scholars in the field remind us that they had dominion over both love and war. So it is with the character of Sula. Gleason, an authority on the African goddess Oya, reminds us that goddesses "were created with both chastity and promiscuity, nurturing motherness and blood thirsty destructiveness" (64).

As such Sula's nurthering takes the form of two notable types of mothers as I mentioned previously: symbiotic and symbolic mother. Sula causes us to seek meaning from the text as much as she defies meaning.

There is a pulling to and a pulling away. Sula is the symbolic mother type, she is nurtherer; she has a nurthering presense in the text. Finally she is semiotic mother also. She has a way of bringing meaning to the text, reminding us of what Elaine Showalter says of women being semiotic sign, the embodiment of meaning that we as readers desperately try to bring to the text. Sula as such is a novel about how we make meaning, but as soon as we think we understand her she looses us. As such one can say Sula represents the post modern text. In the post modern world according to Michael Foucault, text and author are continually reconstructed, and interpreted by the audience (i.e. the reader). There is no consensus that can be reached; there are infinite numbers of varying interpretations. Doesn't this sound like Sula?

In closing Sula is symbolic of the terror of the modern text in that in Bahktinian style, we are forever chasing after the meaning in the text, a carnival of repetitions. Just as Sula is in search of a center, so are we, but there is a never-ending indeterminancy, analogous to Sysyphus, pushing an interpretation up the hill to have it continuously fall back down.